

# THE COFFIN<sup>1</sup>

By CLEMENT WOOD

(From *The Pagan*)

IT stood in the middle of the sitting-room. It was all black, except for the silver shine of the handles. There were flowers on the floor beside it, vague blotches of dulled white and yellow. The burdened odor of honeysuckle, a ground-clinging, unhealthy sweetness, came to the man's nostrils; there was a stiff, pungent scent, too, that he could not place. On the mantel, more flowers; the glimmer of the bracket lamp washed these feebly—its wick was so low that the flame seemed next door to dying at any moment. Flowers filled the stiff-backed chair beneath the lamp. There were two other chairs in the room, both empty.

Thomas Rice loitered at the open doorway, taking in the sparse furnishings. He had stood for ten minutes within the dining room, while Aunt Teby Riggs, Charley's own aunt on his mother's side, whispered harshly all he needed to know, and much that he did not.

"Won't yer have just a bite, Mr. Rice?" she insisted stridently, unable to keep her eyes off the twisted half of his face.

"I et my supper already, thank yer."

"Just a mite of this chicken? Or a cup of somethin' warm, to stay by yer?"

"No 'm, Miss Riggs." He fumbled uneasily with his sweaty felt hat, drooping from his right hand; his coat hung limp over his arm. It was a hot, stirless night; serving writs up the county tired feet and spirit; and the final walk from Belle Ellen to Dolomite was a good eight miles.

She indicated the crowded hat-rack. "Yer can find

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room. . . . Louella's eatin' her supper now." The shrill syllables rasped his ear.

Her disquieting footfall followed him to the sitting-room. Her arm gestured past him. "They got it from undertaker Norton, in Bessemer," she volunteered chattily under her breath.

"Yes."

The dining-room door creaked to at last. He stood, rubbing the ball of his right thumb with his forefinger, as if to cleanse each of invisible irritating dust from the felt hat. The hat was gone; its absence was a momentary annoyance, a perceptible gap in things.

There were two chairs. Both were against the same wall, toward the front of the house. The mantel, the chair with flowers, the two empty chairs, and . . . it. . . . His restless mind took an unconscious inventory. Instinctively he put off thinking about what lay within it.

He took the farther chair. They were almost a room's length apart, and this one was slightly nearer what had been the man he had loved. She—the woman that he despised—could hardly think that his mere sitting there could poison the air for her.

His mind wandered on. Honeysuckles were great flowers for funerals. That sharp, stiff odor—it was like the look of dahlias, stiff, waxy. There were some in old man Lunsford's side yard. Maybe these came from there. He could afford to give away, especially if it cost him nothing: flowers . . . advice. . . . Butting into people's business, with his skinny little face and weedy little beard, like his own weedy front yard.

The dining-room door creaked open. A firmer step thudded on the carpet. She came into the room, a thin hand shading her eyes, to make him out. Then she sat in the empty chair.

"Evenin', Louella." It was her house, now; decency demanded that much.

"Evenin'." The word was spat out.

She sat stiff on the chair-edge, white hands folded upon black skirt. Her eyes pointed straight down the room. She said no more; he kept still. The odor of the kerosene-

lamp swayed with that of the honey-suckles, mingled with a soiled scent he at last imagined must come from the middle of the room.

She had not meant to speak beyond this. But she should have made it civil. Maybe she had been a bit short. "Aunt Teby tol' me yer were here."

His answer was framed after a pause. "Yes. I saw her."

There was nothing more to be said about it. Each nursed sullen dislike.

The stolid minutes passed. Occasional remote noises entered, looked about, left swiftly. A pan banged from the rear of the house; a horse neighed listlessly; doors creaked open and shut with exaggerated quietness. These subsided. The stillness of death spread from the middle of the room to the house and the farm without.

He could watch her profile, in the lamp's withdrawn glimmer. She stared stonily down the room, away from him; there was no harm in observing her unbeknown. Her hair was knotted in the back, a skimpy knot; it lay flat and black above her forehead . . . black, like her dress. Her cheeks were thinner than he remembered seeing her have. Her teeth stuck out, as always. They seemed the whitest thing in the room; their stony inactivity held his imagination. He licked his lips unconsciously.

There had not been a sound from the house for half an hour. He stirred uncomfortably; the chair squeaked. "It doesn't set comfortable, to some," she said, shortly.

"Not very."

"Some folks think they've a right to be partic'lar." Her tone was sour, complaining.

He did not answer. Time drawled along; the tired minutes plodded unendingly. Funny of Charley to want him and—her, who'd never teamed a bit. Think of being married to such as her! Who wouldn't die? . . . Well, talk would make the night pass quicker.

He broke the icy silence. "Crowded tonight?" His right hand gestured a vague circle.

"Yes. Two to a bed upstairs. Aunt Teby and Mary—cot in the kitchen. Two of the boys in the dining room.



Lucky yer don't have to be fixed for. Nowhere left." She laughed without mirth.

His curious eyes travelled around. "Nothing to sleep on here." They returned to the middle of the room in fascination, as if he had waited this excuse to revisit what was there. Afraid that she had caught the morbid fancy, that there was a gruesome, yet possible, couch, he hastened on. "Not that I can't sleep in a chair, though. But I reckon we won't do much sleeping tonight."

"No." The spiteful warning that she would not trust herself asleep, with him around, spoke in the sneering monosyllable.

In the hush that followed, his mind returned to the cold body lying near. He fought against thinking of Charley Hawkins as a corpse; it was of the young Charley, the chum of the years before the marriage, that thoughts came. Memory after memory woke to life out of him, with dizzying rapidity: memories remote from this musty, close room; memories stained with vivid sunlight on fields of black-eyed Susans, with shadow-dapple on the creek's windings, with starry stretches of windy night. A lively, vigorous Charley Hawkins had featured these . . . a good looker, not like himself, his face spoiled from birth. . . .

Yes, Charley had been a lively kid. . . . Baseball, a scrap, a hay-ride to the river, especially whenever a girl was mixed up in it—Charley was chain-lightning. There was that kid widow, Mamie Fagin. Just one trick she had: when you kissed her—God! Her teeth against your neck! The teeth were like Louella's, he reflected, looking over at Charley's widow. Maybe Charley liked 'em with teeth that way; they were always livelier to love.

His mind fondled Louella and the live Charley together for a moment, then returned to earlier time. After Mamie, there had been her unmarried sister, Gussie; Charley switched quick. . . . That scare, when he confided that they were afraid he'd gotten the girl into trouble! False alarm, of course. . . . And the three Bennet girls—not that they were anything. . . . His mind lengthened the roll.

Muscles cramped with sitting in the one position, he rose

awkwardly. To cover the act, he walked over to the mantel, and smelled the flowers. "Pretty," he grudged.

The woman followed slowly, doing over her duty as guide of the occasion. "Those were from Judge O'Rear's; these, Miss Lunsford." She named the others, eager to talk, yet letting tone and look lash her forced listener. Her manner was agitated; the hushed watching must be getting on her nerves, he judged.

Silently she stood beside him, before that black thing in the middle of the room. She must say something. Her hand reached out and touched it. "Plush," she said.

He nodded.

"The best undertaker Norton had."

"It came from him?"

"Yes. He won't have any shiftless funeral," she concluded with bitterness.

They went back to the chairs. The impulse to talk dominated her, and Rice hitched his chair a few steps closer, so that their remarks might be sufficiently low-voiced not to disturb—well, not to disturb what lay in the plush-covered thing. Shivering slightly, she drew hers a bit nearer.

"Shiftless," she had said. He recalled that this was her favorite adjective for him—and he Charley's side-partner, even best man at the wedding! Never a jaunt or a spree that they had not gone on together, until Charley took a fancy to Louella. That was Charley's luck again; Tom had known Louella longer, fancied her first . . . been mad for her, finally. She was too quiet for Charley then; and sometimes . . . sometimes she hadn't frowned at Tom, when he sat near her, itching and miserable. Of course, if he had spoken, she would have laughed . . . with that twisted face of his!

So she and Charley had hitched up. At first, Charley had made him come around . . . insisted. She let him know soon enough and plain enough, that this was no place for him. "Shiftless," she'd called him; she said he was too shiftless to marry. . . . No, she never could have meant that, that he should have spoken. She would have laughed. . . . Not that!

It got worse. She'd scold Charley sharply when he was around. Her hints got too pointed; he'd had the good sense to stay away. Everybody said she had a mean tongue—mean as garbroth.

The woman half faced him now; and her thoughts dwelt on the same period as his. He had done his best to spoil Charley for her, this dirty Tom "Grits." He'd egged him on to drink, and fight, and gamble . . . and chase women. Used to come up to their house and sit around in the way; then tease Charley off into some devilment, when he wanted to stay home. Too lazy, too backward, to open his lips to a girl; he'd kept her fooling around, until she had really wanted—well, not him . . . something. . . . She'd shown him his place at last; out of the door. A squint-faced loafer, a hanger-on around the sheriff's office. . . . Fine friend for her husband! Charley at least would work regular. And now "Grits" sat there like a whipped dog, as he always did when he saw her. Slinking cur of a man!

Something urged him to pretend sympathy for her; she had lost her husband. "He didn't suffer?"

"No. He was well and up Sunday; and now—and now —" She pressed her forehead and cheeks fiercely against her cupped hands; her shoulders trembled rhythmically.

"There, there." He tried awkwardly to feign tenderness. Like as not her tongue had whipped the man to death.

To death. . . . His thoughts opened unwillingly to Charley now—to Charley dead. Queer thing, lying so close—couldn't say a thing, do a thing! . . . It wasn't the Charley he had known; not the same at all. Preachers must be right; the man he had known had gone—somewhere. That thing—cold, uncanny, staring through closed eyelids, with hair and finger-nails still alive, growing horribly—this foul thing was all that was left. Served Louella right! This was what she had made of Charley.

His fancy began to weave thoughts of the dead thing and the woman. She was wrapped in introspection now; his eye measured her from hair to barked black oxfords. One by one his mind stripped off the garments of mourning, and what lay beneath the black shell: a restless fancy cast her in intimate scenes with the man who was gone.



Morbidly the thoughts persisted, were embroidered. What if the chill, dead, bristle-faced thing should hold her as husband holds wife! A fit punishment. . . . Something deep within him lingered on the details.

The after-midnight coolness slunk between them. She shivered, wondering if he had felt it. He was her guest, after all. "I'll get your coat," she whispered, leaning close. She got it, and a wrap to throw around her own shoulders.

It seemed somehow warmer when their chairs were close, she thought. Of course, Tom Rice couldn't help being what he was born to be. And she had thought a lot of him before she knew Charley. If he'd only spoken! . . . And—to come here tonight, when he hadn't been around for five years . . . of course, just because her dead man had wished it. . . .

The friend watched her bent body, as sobs overcame her. The sneer dissolved from his face. Poor thing! She wasn't such a plain-looking woman, even now; she had been decent-looking, as a girl. Even those teeth; they might—they might at least thrill a man.

Rising silently, she flung herself on her knees beside what had been her husband. Her weight ground the flowers into the carpet; the smell of bruised honey-suckle eddied dizzily. With terrible quietness she sobbed and sobbed. The unearthly vigil, on top of the shut-mouthed hours when she had to preserve some calmness, and arrange for the funeral, had been too much; the bars were down, the hysteric flood burst through.

At last her agony shook Tom Rice. The woman would cry herself sick. He walked to her side in the dimness; the lamp seemed weaker than before. He stood, uncertain what to do or say. The sobbing pulsed on.

He knelt beside her, stroking her shoulders with nervous hand. A twitch of repugnance bothered him at touching her. The stroking had no effect at first; low words of endearment, caressing modulations, came, and his touch became more soothing. The disgust wore off. "There, there! I know it hurts. Don't take on so. It won't help. There—"

She became sensible of his presence. Her overburdened

heart overflowed toward him; few men would have done what he was doing. She turned to him, mouth open wordlessly, pale teeth showing. She clung desperately to his shoulders, while the sobs twisted and wracked her. His arms closed upon her; her head burned against his neck. He smelt the odor of kerosene upon her, where she must have been fixing the lamps; then the acrid newness of the mourning cloth. His body felt unnaturally warm where she lay awkwardly bunched against him.

She tried to speak. "He was all I had." Unnerved again, she threw herself across the plush top, forcing her face into it. He looked back longingly at his deserted chair. No, he had helped calm her; it wasn't such an unpleasant sensation, despite the smell of kerosene and new goods . . . and an unpleasant, dirtier odor that he had feared at first came from the corpse, but now localized as coming from her or her clothes. He knelt beside her again.

His touch quieted her; it made him restless. His mind throbbed now with her; under any other circumstances, with a woman so close, he could not hold her so unmovedly. The very vision of her under other circumstances made him more restless; his touch upon her was spasmodic, provocative.

Gradually he rose from his knees to a place beside her, sprawled over the plush. His arm rounded her shoulders, and unconsciously drew her toward him. Still sobbing, she threw herself against his bosom. He began to kiss away the tears. The tang of the moist salt in her eyes quickened him. Their lips met. He felt the pressure of those insidious, insistent teeth—their touch tortured him.

As they clung, the lamp flared up once, then sputtered out. There was the stinging odor of burnt kerosene and charred wick. They did not notice it, nor the clinging sweetness of the bruised honeysuckle.

Tom Rice had one clear thought. The house was crowded; every other room was filled. Out of the moist fervor of the moment the woman realized that her head was against the flowers on the floor—the back of her head, and not her face. She was too weakened from hysteric



sobbing to protest when she found herself lying along the soft fragrant surface; nor did she longer wish to. He felt on the tense skin of his neck the touch of those maddening teeth. Their lips met again in the breathing darkness.

She stirred out of his arms, when the bony fingers of gray-bodied dawn reached through the closed shutters and touched the crushed flowers on which they still were.

"Come, dear," she whispered softly, the gray pallor twisting her plain face into a grotesque tenderness. She kissed his twisted cheek with shy eagerness. He took it passively; the taut thrill of the past hours had gone.

He watched her, as her fingers set the flowers to rights. Meditatively he replaced the two chairs at the two ends of the front wall, where they had first been. They should be found so.

The two watchers took up their almost ended vigil. Morning, and Aunt Teby's black coffee, should find them so—the morning of the funeral.